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ABSTRACT

An experiment on relative clause formation involving Cantonese students who were learning English was conducted. The study sought to determine whether sentence combining exercises would help Chinese students construct long relative clauses instead of the short relative clauses that exist in their first language. For the experimental group each student wrote two impromptu essays, worked on sentence combining exercises for 29 days, and then wrote a third and fourth impromptu essay. The control group students did not undertake the sentence combining exercises. The task was designed to avoid self-monitoring of the writing. Attrition of the experimental group made analysis of the experiment difficult. The following results from the small number of students who completed the experiment were obtained: the control group wrote the same number of relative clauses at the beginning and end and matched the experimental group's initial efforts; and the experimental group (five students) wrote shorter sentences, as measured by number of words per T unit, and wrote fewer relatives. (SW)

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INTERLANGUAGE, THE MONITOR, AND SENTENCE COMBINING

Greg Larkin -- Ron Shook

Like English, the Chinese dialect Cantonese, spoken in the Southern part of China around Canton and Hong Kong, is an S-V-O language. In fact many basic rules of English have close counterparts in Chinese. Cantonese speakers learning English have little problem acquiring the basic grammatical features of English. As many studies have pointed out, especially since Wardhaugh, contrastive analysis greatly overplayed the role of first language interference in second language learning.

On the other side of the coin, learning the grammar of a second language is not the same as being able to produce grammatical sentences in a second language. For instance, last week I was faced with the familiar task of explaining to a new Cantonese student why, although he achieved a perfect score on an objective test of English grammar, we were still placing him in a remedial writing class. The answer, of course, is that we had required and read the writing sample which accompanied the objective test.

As Taylor points out, the first language in the mind of a learner certainly does influence the acquiring of the second language. The grammar of the first language sets as it were "a reference point -- a linguistic system which the student has no alternative but to use when he wishes to say something in the target language for which he is linguistically unprepared." For instance, English, although not an inflected language by any means, does in places use a system of inflections, while Chinese depends exclusively on word order and context to make meaning clear. This fact causes word order in Chinese to be much more rigidly fixed than in English, with the result that certain construct-

ions quite common in English cannot be exactly duplicated in Chinese. Theoretically, these areas of difference will cause special difficulty for Cantonese speakers learning English, until they have heard enough English to begin to form their own hypotheses about English syntax.

One such area of difficulty is the handling of relative clauses. Two basic differences account for the Chinese student's initial difficulty in mastering English relative clauses:

1) English relative pronouns, such as who, which, etc., do not exist in Chinese.

2) In Chinese modifiers always precede the word being modified, whereas in English modifiers of more than one word, including most relative clauses, usually follow the word being modified.

Let me illustrate these differences concretely:

RELATIVE CLAUSE FORMATION: CANTONESE TO ENGLISH

CHARACTERS	你	比	我	嗰	的	飯	係	好	香
ROMANIZATION	NEI	BEI	NGO	GO	DI	FA	HAI	HO	HEUNG
LITERAL TRANSLATION	YOU GIVE I THESE FLOWERS ARE VERY FRAGRANT								
STANDARD ENGLISH	THESE FLOWERS YOU GIVE ME ARE VERY FRAGRANT								
CHARACTERS	你	睇	嗰	本	書	係	邊	個	嘅?
ROMANIZATION	NEI	TAAI	GO	BOON	SHUE	HAI	BIN	GO	GE?
LITERAL TRANSLATION	YOU READ THAT BOOK IS WHOSE?								
STANDARD ENGLISH	WHOSE BOOK (IS THAT WHICH YOU) ARE YOU READING?								

CHARACTERS	佢	食	嗰	的	菜	唔	係	佢	嘅
ROMANIZATION	KOIK	SIK	GO	DI	TSOI	M	HAI	KOIK	GE
LITERAL TRANSLATION	HE EATS THOSE VEGETABLES NOT ARE HIS								
STANDARD ENGLISH	THOSE VEGETABLES HE IS EATING ARE NOT HIS.								

Another way of putting this is that for relative clauses, English is basically right branching and Cantonese is always left branching. A very important implication of the left branching nature of Chinese relative clauses is that Chinese speakers can not tolerate excessively long relative clauses, because the short term memory is strained by having to hold all the modifiers before getting to the thing being modified, which is necessary before even partial closure can be achieved. Consider an extreme, but certainly possible extended series of relative clauses in English, such as "The book which is on the table in the room to the left of the stairs in his house on the hill is mine." Translated word for word, this sentence in grammatical Chinese would be, "On the table in the room, to the left of the stairs, in his house, on the hill, is a book, is mine." In actual practice, however, such a form would very rarely be used. Instead, the long sentence would typically be broken up into very short ones, linked together by the repetition of a key word, making in effect a chain of short sentences as follows: "On the hill is his house. In his house are stairs. To the left of the stairs is a room. In the room is a table. On the table is a book. That book is mine." In other words, the kinds of relationships identified with relative clause construction in Enlgish tend to be expressed in short, closely related individual sentences in Cantonese.

When Chinese students learning English first encounter relative clauses, they are perhaps quickly able to learn rules governing relative clause formation in English, but how can they be given practical reinforcement so that they may acquire those still abstract and hazy rules? The natural thing to do when learning a new language is to stick with simple and "safe" sentences until you have mastered the new language's syntactic forms. Schacter has discussed this under the heading of "avoidance techniques." In the case of relative clauses for Cantonese students learning English, this natural tendency to short sentences is magnified by the short sentence patterns inherent in Chinese relative clause formation.

One currently very popular method for improving both sentence length and complexity, especially with native speakers of English, is the sentence combining exercise, many of which involve relative clause formations. Could sentence combining be one practical method for "drawing out" Cantonese students and their sentences? How will the Chinese student be affected by the strong pull of his first language toward short relative clauses and the strong pull of sentence combining exercises toward long relative clauses? To answer these questions we devised the following program for two groups of Cantonese speaking students:

1) for the experimental group, each student wrote an impromptu essay on each of two separate days

2) each student then worked a set of sentence combining exercises, doing a new unit each day for 29 days.

3) each student then wrote a third and fourth impromptu essay

4) for the control group, each student wrote the first two essays, did no exercises of any kind for 29 days, and then wrote the second two essays.

Because we are teachers of writing, we wanted to see what effect sentence combining would have on the written performance of our students. However, writing, even more than speech, is liable to monitoring, which can make the students' writing qualitatively better than the level they have actually

acquired internally. In order to escape this monitor, we made three demands on our students:

1) they write essays of at least 300 words
2) they have a limited amount of time; in this case 30 minutes
3) they consciously not revise their work

That is, if we hurried them, we hoped they would produce something close to their acquired writing skill. Our practical question was, could Cantonese writers acquire by means of a series of sentence combining exercises the ability to write relative clauses in English? Our hypothesis was that the experimental group, with the sentence combining exercises, would write longer sentences, with more relative clauses than the control group.

To test this hypothesis our students wrote, and half of them practiced sentence combining exercises. At the end of the experiment we tabulated the sentence lengths and the number of relatives, gathering our data into the following parameters: 1) number of words, 2) number of T-units, 3) number of words per T-unit, 4) number of relative clauses, and 5) number of relative clauses per T-unit. We were a bit arbitrary in deciding what was and was not a relative clause. Single word adjectives, for instance, were not counted, but all other reduced relatives were.

The results were spectacular and completely unexpected. The control group did as it was supposed to: it wrote the same number of relatives at the beginning as at the end, and matched the experimental group's initial efforts. What was not expected was the experimental group's effort. In every case, two things happened:

1) the students wrote shorter sentences, as measured by number of words per T-unit.
2) the students wrote fewer relatives

Unfortunately, we had a considerable problem maintaining the population of our groups: the experimental group was particularly decimated: three students returned to Hong Kong part way through the experiment; worse, four students simply quit. We wound up with a total of only five students in the experimental

group who completed all the work assigned. Here is a summary of the relevant data for those five students:

EFFECTS OF SENTENCE COMBINING EXERCISES ON
RELATIVE CLAUSE FORMATION AND T-UNIT LENGTH

Students / Structure	1		2		3		4		5	
	begin	end	begin	end	begin	end	begin	end	begin	end
number of WORDS	478	471	717	534	198	277	362	315	749	439
number of T-UNITS	40	43	52	45	11	17	24	24	41	24
number of RELATIVE CLAUSES	6	2	6	4	5	4	10	4	12	5
number of WORDS PER T-UNIT	12	11	13.8	11.9	18	16.3	15.1	13.1	18.3	18.3
number of RELATIVE CLAUSES PER T-UNIT	.15	.05	.12	.09	.45	.24	.41	.16	.29	.21

Thus, our hypothesis was not confirmed. Yet we are not simply returned back to where we started, because the sentence combining exercises certainly did something to those students who worked through them. We noticed for instance, that although the number of relatives dropped fairly drastically, the number of words per T-unit did not drop nearly as far. The combination of a small decline in T-unit length with a drastic decline in relative constructions suggests that other syntactic forms are being used to fill the voids. Perhaps these forms are a typical step in the interlanguage pattern from Cantonese to English. Perhaps

our downplaying of the monitor's role was a factor in bringing this pattern out. We plan to redo the experiment, hopefully offering a greater incentive to our students so that our population will remain larger. If the same result is obtained, we hope we can identify the exact structures which are replacing the relative clauses. We think that by so doing we can learn something important about interlanguage, the monitor, and sentence combining.